

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/196305>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2019-06-02 and may be subject to change.

Lori Merish, *Archives of Labor: Working-Class Women and Literary Culture in the Antebellum United States*

Laura Visser-Maessen



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13291>
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Laura Visser-Maessen, « Lori Merish, *Archives of Labor: Working-Class Women and Literary Culture in the Antebellum United States* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2018-2, Online since 25 July 2018, connection on 25 July 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13291>

This text was automatically generated on 25 July 2018.

Creative Commons License

Lori Merish, *Archives of Labor: Working-Class Women and Literary Culture in the Antebellum United States*

Laura Visser-Maessen

- 1 Lori Merish, *Archives of Labor: Working-Class Women and Literary Culture in the Antebellum United States*
- 2 Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. 312. ISBN-13: 978-0822362999
- 3 Laura Visser-Maessen
- 4 "If men do not help to secure equal pay for women," Lucy Ann Lobdell, an American working-class woman, wrote in her 1855 autobiography, they must "permit her to wear the pants, and breathe the pure air of heaven" while they "stay and be convinced at home with the children how pleasant a task it is to act the part that woman must act" (5). Such politically astute and blunt discourse is a far cry from the allegedly 'feminine' language we have come to associate with 19th-century antebellum women's writings through classics like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and others. Yet this sentimental tradition and the middle class ideals of domesticity from which it was derived are quintessential for understanding antebellum workingwomen, Associate Professor of English at Georgetown University Lori Merish argues in her exciting new book, *Archives of Labor: Working-Class Women and Literary Culture in the Antebellum United States*. Through the analysis of a largely untouched but rich archive of literary expressions for, by, and about workingwomen, she skillfully demonstrates how representations of female wage labor became a "site of ideological contest." In this, the realities of female breadwinners, women performing "men's work," workingwomen's dissent, and cross-racial class identifications and conflict were mitigated through the middle-class, racialized rhetoric of "true womanhood" (13-14). This both hindered *and* facilitated workingwomen's struggles of (self)definition and class power, suggesting that intersectionality is key in understanding workingwomen's lives and (perceived) significance for American literary, cultural, and labor history. The insights she derives from this exercise then are not just

valuable for scholars working in these fields, but also mute any remaining discussions regarding the artistic and societal merit of working-class culture.

- 5 Merish's compelling monograph, which complements her work on the ideological confines of 19th-century female consumption she developed in *Sentimental Materialism* (Duke University Press, 2000), comes at a fitting moment in academic and American history. As the first book-length study of antebellum workingwomen's literary works, it tops the academic and popular interest in bottom-up history that has been steadily emerging since the mid-1980s. Studies in grassroots leadership and the recent autobiography boom among others have fueled interest in the now increasingly accepted (international) field of "working-class studies." The notion of putting the voices of those at the bottom central in the works about them is particularly pertinent in a time when the American middle-class is shrinking and poor rural whites drove Donald Trump's presidential victory, while the majority of the working-class is set to become defined by people of color over the next decade due to a combination of technological innovations, globalization, and racism.
- 6 Despite the recent uptick in academic journals, books, and programs dedicated to working-class life, however, the field remains underdeveloped. As Merish complains, in the US—built on the presumption of a classless society—the idea of a "working-class culture" still needs to register. Let alone one that is considered 'worthy' to investigate, compile, or even keep from destruction, which subsequently hampered her research (247-48). Within this forgotten 'archive,' the work of workingwomen authors, especially those of color, has been pushed even further to the margins. Merish's innovative goal then is not just the addition of class and workingwomen to 19th-century cultural studies (9), but to challenge public memory of the nineteenth-century working class and working-class protest as 'white.' *Archives of Labor* accordingly uses an interdisciplinary and 'dialogical' framework for "radically historicizing workingwomen's vision" and to "restore a sense of literary texts as sites of live and uneven social struggle—a perspective sorely lacking in nineteenth-century American literary studies" (13). As such, she carefully balances textual analyses with the socio-historical contexts in which they emerged, introducing us to a variety of working-class women types and to the narrative spaces available to them to unravel the gendered and racialized "ways in which the female worker was positioned to *represent* the condition of class exploitation, subjection, and economic suffering" (8).
- 7 Merish sets her story between the 1830s and the onset of the Civil War, when the United States radically transformed from an agricultural society to an industrialized, urban one. This crucial moment in its capitalist history coincided with a drastic revision of print culture through the development of the penny press in the 1830s, paperback novels in the 1840s, and an overall rise in popular democratic journalism and sensational fiction (12-13). With workingwomen as the core readership and often its producers, it stood to reason that these products would become part of a battle over the ideological constructions of their lives.
- 8 Views of white industrial workingwomen, however, provided an apt ideological lens for judging all workingwomen's lives. The first three chapters are therefore devoted to women working in the textile industries, the foremost mass employers of female working-class labor in the 19th century. The first two detail the historical and theoretical framework—of the influence of the (racialized) construction of gender on the daily experience and narrative possibilities of workingwomen—that guides the rest of the book.

This is done through the deconstruction of the discourse related to these mill women as exemplified in the 'myth of the Lowell girl.' In this, the Lowell mill in Massachusetts was touted as a sign of industrial progress and American exceptionalism, allegedly untouched by the class discontent that characterized the British mills.

- 9 Within this narrative, mill women emerged as nationalist icons, but in the process were 'whitened' and reduced to a temporary, depoliticized state—emphasized in the epithet 'girl'—by middle-class reformers and activist working-class men. They deliberately stressed passivity and beauty as female virtues to create a positive vision of factory workers (24-27, 43-44, 55, 74). To counter these images and the language of 'respectability' and paternalism used to describe them, workingwomen used labor periodicals like the *Voice of Industry* and the new urban genres of gothic literature, sensationalism, and melodrama to describe their more complex social realities (54, 71-72). So-called 'seduction tales' (depicting women 'lured' to the urban factories) especially revealed a world in which industrial women were subjected to various forms of economic and sexual exploitation. But stories like "Anna Archdale," published anonymously in the cheap story paper *Flag of Our Union*, and others revealed they also displayed meaningful forms of "desire, independence, and agency" (87) through the money they earned.
- 10 Merish continues by chronicling how moral reformers, to offset the dangers of the sexualized and interracial environment of the mills and working-class urban neighborhoods, then elevated the stereotypical figure of the lonely seamstress in their writings as the epitome of the 'deserving poor' (Chapter 3). Subjugating her to the middle-class discourses of womanhood works like Charles Burdett's *The Elliott Family* and other writings, the seamstress was turned into a 'poor helpless female' in need of a "reformed (domestic) paternalism" (p.130), despite the complex and radical democratic vision, agency, and sexuality encountered in the writings of actual seamstresses.
- 11 Her intriguing study of domestic servants of color in the 'free' North and West, who took over the vacancies left after white women's 'flight' to the urban factories, in the final three chapters underscore the racialized aspects of the middle-class feminine discourse used to define working-class women. Through Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (Chapter 4) and E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* (Chapter 5), Merish shows how the definition of domestic labor as 'non-work' allowed white women to enforce race and class discipline. But she also reveals how these servants exercised power amid households characterized by a fluid combination of racial mixing and conflict that underline the actual precariousness of contemporary race and class categories. Moreover, they effectively wielded political and narrative agency in combining conventional modes of storytelling to undermine the gendered language on which these conventions were based in order to reveal the hitherto "invisible interior of free black life" (163-64, 192). By adding the experiences of Mexican-American servants living in Mexican Californian missions during annexation to the United States as described in their first-person *testimonios* and in novels (Chapter 6), Merish successfully transplants her race-class analysis "within the frame of US empire building and territorial expansion" (8, 219). Particularly the work by Apolinaria Lorenzana, Eulalia Pérez, and Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton convincingly "affirm Mexican women's labor as 'socially and culturally valuable'" (220), despite these women being subjected to white middle class racialized notions of Mexicans' class and gender identities that were forged against the background of slavery and emergence of 'free' black domestic workers.

- 12 Interwoven in *Archives of Labor* are many other worthwhile discussions that speak to workingwomen's agency and depth, like the author's examination of female labor organizers' speeches, the attitude mill women had towards clothing—both as a product of their labor and means to establish social status and femininity—or workingwomen's proud portrayal of prostitution as an adventurous “female entrepreneurial ‘ambition’” (146).
- 13 Because of the limits posed on available research material, Merish's case studies may at times feel inconclusive, particularly in regards to literary products by workingwomen of color. The richness of the primary sources and wide range of authors investigated nonetheless are impressive; particularly the *testimonios* present a fascinating read. This, combined with her lucid and passionate writing style and extensive and detailed textual analyses, makes her case persuasive. The book moreover serves as a valuable addition to works like Amy Kaplan's *Anarchy of Empire*, studies on (late) 19th-century feminist and immigrant literature (Anzia Yezierska comes to mind) and working-class history and culture in general by evoking broader discussions relating to working-class literary studies, like questions of merit, characteristics, ownership, or the role of politics in art, as developed by scholars like Paul Lauter, Paula Rabinowitz, Constance Coiner, Sherry Linkon, and others.
- 14 Yet Merish's greatest accomplishment lies in the interdisciplinarity with which she approaches her sources. For the first time bringing together the individual insights US cultural and American Studies scholars, labor historians, and academics in the fields of literature, women's and race studies have compiled on antebellum workingwomen's lives, her work holds great promise for exciting future research. She mentions revising interpretations of the ‘classical’ literary texts of the 19th century and beyond by adding class analyses, particularly to works that have been viewed predominantly through a gender, race, ethnic, or LGBTQ-lens; rethinking the relationship between working-class literary and performance cultures; and the ramifications of working-class culture for understanding America in a global context. But countless other avenues can be imagined. Think of (dis)continuities between 19th century working-class literature and the proletarian writings of the 1930s, the new scholarship on frontier women, or connections between literary works by and about ‘free’ blacks and slave narratives, among others.
- 15 Above all, Lori Merish's *Archives of Labor* reminds us to take seriously the working-class, not just as a force that decides elections, but as a window into the human condition. That its produced fiction incidentally helps to further deride the discourse of ‘true womanhood’ in the current era of #metoo and increased political activism by women as just that—fiction—serves as additional proof of poetic justice.